



Wisconsin Family Ties

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Contact: Joanne Juhnke, Wisconsin Family Ties Policy Director
608-320-6165 / joanne@wifamilyties.org

Wisconsin Family Ties (WFT) is the only non-profit agency in the state of Wisconsin that is run by parents with the lived experience of raising a child with social, emotional, behavioral or mental health challenges. WFT parent peer specialists support and assist families throughout Wisconsin whose children have these needs as well, drawing on our own experiences and additional training as we assist other families to navigate the school system and advocate for themselves and their children.

On behalf of families whose children have mental health and behavioral health needs, we appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony for today's hearing of the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding.

At a time when anxiety and depression are on the rise among the young people of Wisconsin, the families we serve are those whose children's path to an excellent education is rockier than most. When school funding is in crisis, as is currently the case in Wisconsin, our students who are already vulnerable are set at even further risk.

On the one hand, money can't buy the kind of human relationships and connectedness and empathy that help our kids navigate their challenges at school.

On the other hand, when funding is squeezed, and class sizes balloon, and corners are cut, and school social workers and counselors are stretched past the limit – the relationships suffer. And so do our kids.

Wisconsin lost nearly 1,500 teachers between 2010 and 2014, while the number of public school students remained the same. Class sizes have risen significantly since 2011, which makes it hard for teachers to provide the individual attention and prioritize the connectedness that our students need. Support staff ratios are far below recommended minimums, across the categories of school-based staff who work with our kids with mental-health related challenges: social workers, counselors, psychologists, nurses.

The state's rate of special education funding has been falling for over two decades: In 1997, the state provided funding for 40% of special education costs. Today, it funds less than 26%. The dollar amount of state special education funding has been frozen for a full decade.

Ten years of frozen funding is ten years too many. Wisconsin needs to turn this around, and we need to do it now.

As our public school students with disabilities and their districts suffer the consequences of this frozen funding, Wisconsin has lavished funding on special needs vouchers, over the passionate objections of disability advocacy organizations across the state and without public hearing. For the students with disabilities they choose to educate, private schools get over \$12,000 fully funded even if it costs less; and if it costs more, the state will pay 90% of that. This is remarkably unfair to our public schools, which must

Wisconsin's family voice for children's mental health

16 North Carroll Street, Suite 230 • Madison, WI 53703 • 608.267.6800 or 800.422.7145 • www.wifamilyties.org

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educate all students regardless of ability and abide by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the process.

We've got this backwards. What we need to freeze are the special needs vouchers. What we need to fund is our public schools.

We cannot support our students to succeed if we do not have the access to the resources for supporting the adults at school to be able to connect, inspire, de-escalate, teach and lead.

In the words of Dr. Ross Greene, "Kids do well if they can."

Teachers and social workers and counselors and aides do well if they can, too. Wisconsin needs to fund our public schools in a way that makes it possible for everyone to succeed – most urgently for the most vulnerable of our students.

Thank you for your work on this Commission. We look forward to the Commission's report, and to productive action in the next legislative session.